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The Sounds of Social Space: Branding, Built Environment, and Leisure in Urban

China by Paul Kendall, Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2019, 280 pp., \$68.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-8248-7770-5

As a county-level city of less than two hundred thousand in population, Kaili in Guizhou is four administrative tiers beneath China's best researched urban centres, Beijing and Shanghai. Selecting Kaili as the site for his study of everyday musical activity and the branding of the built environment, Paul Kendall argues for more research on urban life to be focused on issues specific to small cities, not least because, in China, these lesser-known places combine to 'constitute a substantial slice of the global experience' (5). Kaili's population is ethnically diverse and the city is promoted officially to tourists as home to cultural festivals of the Miao and Dong minorities. This sets up Kendall's musical subject matter not as any specific genre or a particular ethnic group's practices per se, but instead as 'cross-ethnic musical interaction' (11).

More than this, though, the book's central focus is social space; its main thread is found in Henri Lefebvre's triad for understanding space in everyday life (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). The idea of *perceived* space is about features of the built environment apprehended by the senses and how people move around this environment; *lived* space points to how the built environment is imagined symbolically in everyday experience; and *conceived* space is about the planning and mapping of this environment. Kendall extends the latter by raising the idea of *conceived branded* space, using it to approach the relationship between the city's tourist image and its spaces of leisure activity. Indeed, after a chapter outlining this theoretical focus and the author's fieldwork experiences, Chapter 2 is mainly dedicated to charting the development of Kaili's city branding in line with its shift from an industrial to a tourist economy, particularly since the 1990s. The references to festivals of local culture

complement visual images that stress a flavour of *minzu* ('ethnicized nationality') lifestyle (38). Kendall's overarching argument is that this branding is intertwined with how people practice leisure and think about city space; thus, conceived (planned or branded) space is far more extensively entangled with the everyday imagining of lived space than in Lefebvre's conception, where the two are in competition for predominance.

How, though, is music part of this picture? The most prominent visual images of Kaili's *minzu* branding reference music: the giant statue of a Miao instrument at a major road junction, and photographs in official literature of occasional festive events held in the city's under-used Nationalities Stadium. Kendall's starting point is the disjuncture between images like these, conjuring ideas of a *minzu* place that is highly musical, and everyday reality in which aspects of modernity such as traffic sound make unamplified music impossible in most outdoor spaces, and inhabitants talk of their city as 'musically without merit' (2). This discrepancy opens the three chapters (3 to 5) in which the book resonates most directly with concerns more mainstream to ethnomusicology and Chinese music research. Chapter 3 focuses on the notion of *yuanshengtai*, glossed here as the 'culturally authentic' (76). While, as Kendall points out, existing work from ethnomusicologists writing in English focuses on official and academic discourses surrounding this topic, his discussion shows how the notion is meaningful in the everyday lives of musicians. In line with his interest in space, the conclusion is that *location* is a crucial factor in *yuanshengtai* for the city's inhabitants, most of whom associate it with musical practices in the surrounding villages of Kaili's wider municipality and not the city proper.

Chapters 4 and 5, however, are where earlier tantalising mentions of 'amateur musicians' finally give way to ethnographic foregrounding of musical activity in the city. Sometimes the impact of interview quotations in previous chapters was diminished by their shortness of detail about interviewees and their connections to the issues at stake – often there was only a

single line to introduce the person, for instance, as ‘a student at Kaili university’ or ‘a hip-hop dancer’ (69). But now Kendall incorporates a richer sense of the figures important in the several musical worlds he presents: two choirs for middle-aged and retiree members, a few groups of students playing in cafes and classrooms at Kaili University, and a commercial entertainment complex with karaoke, open-mic sessions and bands. Chapter 4’s focus is on these practices being in different senses spatially fluid (with noise issues and redevelopment leading groups frequently to change locations) and spatially stable (including through the continuity in language that inhabitants use to refer to parts of their city despite its quickly changing landscape). Chapter 5 explores contrasts in how certain groups conceptualise and practice their activities. While, for instance, the indoor choir focuses on discipline and technique, the outdoor choir is more concerned with exercise and atmosphere; the suggestion is that details in musical aspects such as vocal production, pronunciation and togetherness may be connected with different kinds of leisure space.

But while this is the chapter that most directly harnesses ethnographic presence at the moments of singing and playing, it is also the most ambivalent on the book’s key theoretical topics. Kendall is reluctant to conclude that differences between groups in social organisation and vocal production are ‘inscribed in space’, particularly as many of their music locations are too temporary for space and practice to become associated in people’s minds (150). Likewise, the discussion of the city’s *minzu* branding culminates here in the somewhat unexpected suggestion that *generation* may be a more important marker of social differentiation than ethnicity for music groups in the city (170). This undogmatic handling of the book’s main topics is a strength partly resulting from a fieldwork method grounded in research data rather than the author’s preconceptions (16). It does not, however, fully insulate against drawbacks stemming from the noteworthy consistency of Kendall’s theoretical focus; Chapter 4’s narrative, for example, necessitates some largely flat description of the times of

the day and week each group gets together (128-132), perhaps at the expense of other discussions of potential interest to a wider ethnomusicology readership. In particular, the profile later on of an a cappella group led by American teachers at Kaili University only partially explores several fascinating issues, including the culturally mediated differences in visions for the group, singers' fragmentary learning practices with MP3 recordings and personalised impromptu notations, and intragroup social hierarchies (159-161).

Indeed, the nuance of Kendall's exploration of space is not always matched on points of musicological detail. He repeatedly emphasises a focus on 'amateur' music, but by the time he acknowledges in Chapter 4 that the conceptual divide between amateur and professional activity is complex (120), a simplified duality is already deeply entrenched in his approach. One phenomenon apparently outside of the amateur sphere is 'piped music', but the author's understanding of this needs explanation; among few concrete examples offered are residents' mobile phone ringtones, but is this really *piped* or simply *recorded* music (69-70)? The Sinologist readership is another whose concerns sometimes become subordinate to the weighty focus on urban studies and space. The book undoubtedly benefits from prioritising the specific realities of Kaili rather than extrapolating too many generalisations about wider Chinese urban experience, beyond mentions of the country's broad shift from Maoist to consumer society. It is odd, though, that despite the helpful Romanisations and occasionally Chinese characters supporting the explanation of nuanced concepts, curious readers of Chinese are never given the characters for the name of this lesser-known city (凯里). More consequentially, a wider lens might be useful in Chapter 2 when the idea of the 'civilised hygienic city' (*wenming weisheng chengshi*) is considered as part of Kaili's *minzu* branding (65). This notion is a pervasive part of the wallpaper of public service messages across urban China, so it is hard to be convinced of its potency in the particularities of Kaili's development as a modern tourist destination.

But, Kendall undoubtedly sets a high standard for the kinds of ethnographic work he advocates for approaching space and the small city, expertly blending participant observation, and material from both informal conversation and 32 recorded interviews with vivid descriptions of orientating walks and bus journeys through the city. The book's handling of textual sources is also remarkable, incorporating research in English and Chinese across urban studies, anthropology, ethnomusicology, human geography and Chinese studies, and extensively referencing local media and official literature. Quotation from international guidebooks and interviews with American city residents adds outsider perspectives that are highly effective in contextualising the author's arguments about the reach of the city's branding. Also particularly valuable are candid discussions about doing research in China; acknowledgement of frustration and failure when working with online and physical archives is instructive reading for even experienced scholars, as are more positive comments about research in a small city – Kendall recounts the coincidences of bumping into contacts at moments that would lead to significant discoveries (76).

If it is hard to imagine this book being incorporated extensively into the mainstream ethnomusicology or Chinese music classroom, this is only because its considerable contributions are so tightly focused on specialist issues related to space. It leads the way in connecting the study of everyday music and sound to understandings of social space, and these theoretical insights resonate widely. Not least, the book is an engaging illustration of the value of foregrounding lesser-known urban areas, and it deserves to inspire similarly forward-thinking research on music in everyday experience.

Reference

Lefebvre, Henri. [1974] 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.

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